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AUTHOR Schraeder, Laura L.
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ABSTRACT

A middle school teacher with both English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) and mainstream students in her class attempted to foster learning independence by encouraging self-evaluation and examination of the learning process. Initially, this involved providing them with rubrics and checklists for assessing work on several assignments. A second step was to have students create their own evaluation tools and criteria, and for the teacher to use them for assessing their work. The students gained confidence with each step, communicating more freely with the teacher about their work and what they needed in order to complete assignments. Based on the success of this approach, the teacher created a contract for student learning. Each student researched a topic of his choice, and selected a due date for each phase of the project within a predetermined time frame. Students responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to schedule their own time and complied with their chosen dates. A majority met all their contractual obligations. It is concluded that the process empowered students by requiring them to behave responsibly, work at their own pace, supporting self-esteem, and using higher-level thinking skills. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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Empowering ESL Students in the Mainstream Through Self Assessment and Contracted Learning

Laura L. Schraeder

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Empowering ESL Students in the Mainstream Through Self Assessment and Contracted Learning

In an effort to assess a child's learning, teachers across the nation wrestle with the theory of authentic assessment versus traditional testing. Consequently, one of the most frequently posed questions of today's educators is "How do we know children learn?" Historically, the obvious answer lay in a myriad of both standardized and teacher generated test scores. Personally, I find it rather distressful that a child's entire academic future lies in state based on a set of well designed isolated data. What is even worse is children equate learning or not learning with such results. "I know I'm smart because I got a good score on a test." "My teacher gave me a good grade. That's how I know I did well." (Glazer, 1994) All too often, our students echo these words to let us know they depend on us to tell them they are intelligent and are learning.

Unfortunately for years, teachers passed judgment on their students without giving them a chance to say anything in their defense regarding their learning. How can we assume whether a child learns or not? How can we determine to what extent internalization and long term learning occur? Have we ever asked our students if they feel they are learning, or the degree to which they think they are learning? Do we dare?

Regarding our bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) students, these questions are even more difficult to answer due to linguistic acquisition barriers masking performance. Hence, these students as well as their mainstream counterparts need the opportunity to share in the evaluation process with their teachers. In order to do this, we must become risk-takers encouraging our students to join us by putting some 'skin in the game.' We need to take a back seat view and admit that education is changing. No longer does the spot light shine on the teacher; it shines on our students, all of them. Moreover, the necessity to include our students in the assessment process is imperative. After all, to what degree is authentic assessment authentic if we do all the assessing? We can take great pains to develop real life assessments. Yet, if the students do not assume ownership from beginning to end, what do they gain? Why should we speak for them? Are they not capable of defending their learning and its importance?

Consequently, believing students can share in the evaluation process motivated me to take a chance. Like many middle level educators serving both mainstream and ESL students, I always assumed the role of pilot regarding grades and assessment;

however, one day the light of change illuminated the horizon. So I decided to train some co-pilots, my students.

Initially, I provided my students with examples of rubrics and various checklists I designed to furnish a foundation for them from which to build a framework. After using these for the first few writing assignments, I instructed my students to create their own evaluation tool for the next one. Needless to say, my students had a virtual field day; for, they could not believe their good fortune. I might even go as far as to say that some of my more astute students thought I had taken leave of my senses. Yet they willingly jumped on the 'create your own evaluation bandwagon.' Submitted assessment sheets ranged from start with 100 points and subtract 1 point for every error to well thought out checklists and rubrics. Somehow, however, that did not matter. The important thing was that the students took control and spoke out about their work. Wholeheartedly, I respected their first attempts and graded their work according to each individual student's chosen standards and criteria. Eighty-five students created eighty-five different evaluations. Each time the students devised their own rubrics, the more confidence they gained. Weaning them away from dependence on me fostered independence and self-esteem especially in my ESL students.

Positive attitudes soon replaced my ESL students' once felt anxiety; for, they quickly realized comparison to anyone or competition with anyone simply did not exist. (Richard-Amato, 1988) For example, if their rubrics did not reflect numerous grammatical or syntactical criteria because they felt overall content was more important, so be it. Since they did not fear overbearing criticism from me, they were free to communicate their true feelings about their work. How else do ESL students acquire language? Red lining and circling every mistake would only raise their affective filters resulting in shut down. (Crawford, 1993) Therefore, rather than risking this, we conferred about areas needing improvement. In so doing, my students' self-esteem and confidence level remained in tact. Gentle doses of constructive criticism void of negativism promote learning and are much more effective for ESL students. (Garcia, 1976)

All my students gravitated toward frequent opportunities to tell me how they felt about their learning and why. During classroom reflective discussions, students frequently expressed comments such as "I really need to understand the assignment in order to do this." As teachers, we know that part of any well-constructed evaluation tool hinges on whether the students

fulfill the assignment or task. Many of my ESL students verbalized that they must think about their work before selecting criteria for me to assess. They must decide what aspects of the assignment are important and their degree of importance, not me. The onus of proving their learning rests with them. Such primitive reflection forces them to confront their work objectively. Thus, the responsibility to point me in the right direction becomes theirs. No longer are they able to turn in a finished task leaving the final judgment with me. It is for them to see the project through from its initial planning stage to its inevitable evaluation.

Delighted by my students' overwhelming positive response to self assessed learning, I decided to continue empowering them by pursuing yet another instructional venue, contracted learning. Contracted learning encourages students to exercise their bargaining power with their teachers regarding project choice or various project requirements such as due dates, a project's progress, or a project's contents. In addition, it provides opportunities for students to live up to their word or experience the consequences if they do not.

Using a previously designed research project proved extremely beneficial in my initial implementation of this

concept. After carefully reviewing the project's components, works cited list, notes, outline, rough draft, and final copy, with my students, creating a suitable contract fell into place. Every student was to research a topic of his or her choice and then chose a due date for each facet of the project within a pre-determined window of time. Seemingly, the chance to choose provided every student a flexible avenue on which to determine his or her personal time frame. Moreover, it served as a time line guide for the students rather than an absolute.

Overwhelmingly, the students responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to choose their personal time frame. For not only would they have ownership in the final assessment of their work but also in the time line during which they assimilated it. Throughout the next few weeks, all my students adhered to their chosen dates for each section or knowingly suffered the penalties resulting from their inability to do so. When the project window closed, sixty-eight percent of my students of which nineteen were ESL successfully met all their contractual obligations. The remaining thirty-two percent faltered at least once.

What do these statistics mean? What did I really want my students to gain from this learning experience? Did I simply want them to learn to choose dates on which I collected parts of

their projects or was there more? Truly, I hoped to teach them to make responsible decisions with the understanding that based on their actions regarding those decisions, either positive or negative consequences follow. I believe I accomplished this. Obviously, the majority of both my mainstream and ESL students comprehend decision making; therefore, contracted learning served as an opportunity to apply their understanding.

How then does self-assessment and contracted learning empower ESL students in the mainstream? First, both strategies require the students to exercise responsible behavior. They make the choices, not the teacher. Moreover, they must live up to the these choices in order to establish credibility. Second, students are able to comfortably work at their own pace and judge their work according to what they deem important. Consequently, by not overshadowing ESL students with criticism or 'pigeon holing them' to conform to mainstream learning stereotypes, they acquire and internalize language faster. Both self-assessment and contracted learning stress individualization opposed to compelling students to all learn the same way within the same time frame. Third, ESL students' confidence and self-esteem levels rise substantially. They readily gain a sense of independence and soon realize what they can do rather than what

they can not do. No longer are ESL students on the outside looking in; for, they are experiencing equal decision making opportunities while exercising control over their learning as their mainstream peers.

Therefore, providing the opportunity to choose whether in the assessment or contracted learning realm encourages student utilization of higher level thinking skills. Regardless of culture, all children can think, reason, decide, and learn when given the opportunity to do so. Challenging students to be introspective about their learning enables our students to be risk-takers and exercise their uninhibited adventuresome spirits. When all is said and done, if it was not for all our students' willingness to sail through uncharted waters with us, it really would not matter what type of vessel we provide or how astute we think we are at its navigation.

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